

GEORGE



THANIEL

POEMS

*in English*



"AMARANTH EDITIONS"

TORONTO, 1979







George Thaniel at The Rock Gardens,  
Hamilton, Ontario                      July 1979

*GEORGE THANIEL*

P O E M S

I Villa Vergiliana

II You Bet

*"Amaranth Editions"*

*Toronto, 1979*

*Difficile est proprie  
communia dicere.*

Horace



I

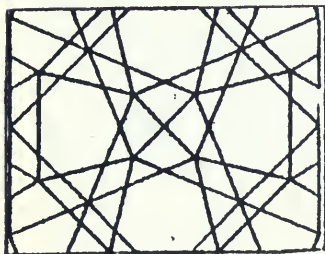
VILLA \* VERGILIANA





*Opus Incertum*

You find the *opus quadratum* reliable  
but the pell-mell of *opus incertum*  
is just as solid my dear Modestus  
both play well in the chess of time.



*Updated Dido*

Deserted Dido climbed the pyre  
pious Aeneas changed the tire  
and drove forth to his destination  
to found a new powerful nation.

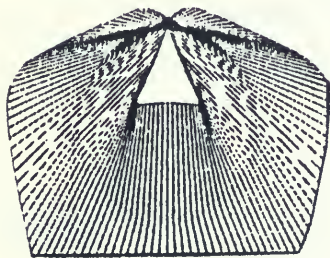
Fate willed for you simpler goals  
but truer to nature; in virtuous bowls  
you mix everyday's trustful wine  
exotic drinks is not your line.

A common blessing is still the fall rain  
the breath of time soothes all pain  
and so be it forever; forgive  
let Dido change her mind and live.



*Epigram*

To scry the future  
is to visit Hades  
to reach a soul  
is to live its hell.



*Athens-Rome, Summer 68*

Riding not a magic broom  
but a plane  
from Athens to Rome  
the eternal city.

Velvety heat  
smacking of hybris  
memories of thirty centuries  
packed in a nutshell.

*Fiumicino.*

Descend  
and dropping your wings behind  
observe a minute's silence  
for Icarus  
who never made it.



*Santa Lucia*

They dished out the *antipasti*  
and there was a *trio*  
delivering, you'd say, to the grave  
"*Santa Lucia*".

*Vino bianco*  
*vino rosso*  
*acqua minerale.*

None will die of boredom  
that is for sure.



*Two Prosaic Poems**I*

Hercules touring the world with his oxen  
is said to have decreed the city  
which, inhabited at first by the Greeks  
then taken and held by the Samnites,  
fell at the end into the hands  
of Mother Rome.

A peaceful city on the sea  
fishing and bathing at ease  
unfolding calmly backwards  
until Vesuvius erupted  
spreading its liquid wealth  
over roofs and pillars  
in burial joining the fine  
with the negligible materials.



## II

How embroider serene words on Paestum  
whose people, once subdued by the Lucanians,  
had only a day of mourning every year  
to stammer their old Greek names  
and try to remember?

And yet, the candor of the scenery  
triumphs over past sorrows  
and those two maidens in the museum sculpture  
are happily pursued by two eager youths,  
while the sturdy columns of the Doric temples  
appear to relish their survival  
under the proud sun.



*Secular Song*

(After Horace)

Boys

No space trip, listen to me  
no space trip will comfort me  
no dash to heaven or to hell  
will break my inner shell.

Girls

Universe looks much like earth  
death is birth and birth is death  
no dash to heaven or to hell  
will break my inner shell.

Both Sexes

No space trip, listen to me  
no space trip will comfort me  
no dash to heaven or to hell  
will break my inner shell.





*The Youth of Ischia*

Hercules must have posed thus  
for the customary picture  
after each labor.

The youth of Ischia stood erect  
under a bright sun  
claiming my camera's attention  
while his mama chanted Sibyl-like:  
*Many have pictured him, signore,  
but none ever sent us a copy  
che peccato!*

Working for the *Pax Deorum*  
I had the film printed in Rome  
and sent the youth his photo.



*The Formulas of Homer*

Hunting for butterflies  
becomes a rather obsolete pastime  
in this attractive era of formulas.

The blind poet grows suddenly  
into a choreographer  
whose dancers  
move ably on the platform  
of his tongue  
with the regularity of neon signs.

The stage directions are all here:  
*mobility, modification, expansion*  
*inversion, separation, and...copulation.*

Then, shouldn't the poet's summons  
to the Muse  
run truly as follows:  
*Oh Goddess, grant me plenty of formulas*  
*and leave the rest to me?*



*Literno*

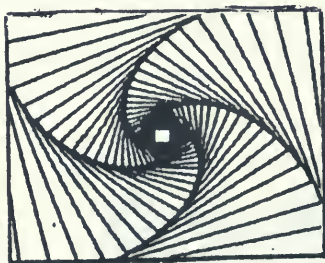
Throw all your knowledge into limbo  
as you enter this sea.  
The lost ships of antiquity  
return here in different shapes.  
Do not collate them with the figures  
which you know from ancient drawings  
nor those of medieval times  
with the skull and the crossbones.  
They are mixed with the sand  
reborn in shells and grassy pebbles  
floating in the eyes of children.

On the recommendation of Pythagoras  
restore yourself to nature.



*After Orcus*

Once I am dead  
*Orci traditus thesauro*  
like that crazy early Latin poet  
Naevius,  
then my voice will rise  
like bread.



*At Cuma*

*Procul, o procul  
este, profani*

Vergil's dismissing line  
suddenly sounds up-to-date  
as the mysterious grotto  
formerly graced by the Sibyl's  
god-inspired gasps  
remains shut to us.

To enter you must fool the guard  
and then you may receive  
an oracle on the head  
in the disguise of a jagged rock.

Better shuffle through the remains  
the modest relics of the citadel  
but lo! a whole twig torn from its tree  
lies on the ground.

A lady reaches to fill her hands  
with fruit  
while I scan the dusty leaves  
for the elusive Golden Bough.



*A Statue*

Your eyes have a mercurial light  
in their deep-set holes  
you came out of stone  
an accident of the perpetual design.

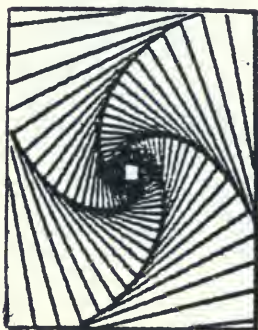
You came out of darkness  
from the unnamed grapes  
pressed into a sudden draught of wine  
in urgent need of being drunk  
not in a bitter pub  
not in a stale restaurant  
but in the candid peristyle  
of a wealthy Roman villa.



*The Skeletons of Pompeii*

These skeletons  
these telling figures  
should not inspire dread to our eyes  
but rather bring us a catharsis  
to some of us long overdue.

Behing our ivory sunglasses  
the cameras the guidebooks  
under our hats of straw  
let us review the prism of our vanities  
ere the lava of time presses heavily  
upon us all.



*Capri*

No more goats  
lots of tourists  
names: Augustus, Tiberius, Munthe.

The steep rock sharpened by the wind  
and the gossip of centuries -  
look up a certain Suetonius Tranquillus.

May Tiberius rest in peace  
the naked bricks smile grimly  
let us escape to the *Blue Grotto*.





*Propertius*

*Et moi, j'aime les âmes tourmentées,*  
said the French lady  
pensively fingering  
the beads of her necklace.

Propertius, we thought, was one  
of those tormented souls  
and *Cynthia Potens*  
only an excuse  
of a certain caliber.



*Mass at the Church of Baia*

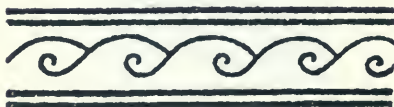
*A pereant Baiae*

Heaven cannot exist without the earth  
so the church of Baia flanks the street  
that represents the whole world.

People old and young of various sizes  
thicken the pews down the aisle  
so to heaven the flock of the blessed rises  
with angels pushing to form a pile.

The priest addresses the congregation  
in Ciceronian style  
while cars blow their horns  
and drive by.

Some benefactor's remarkable qualities,  
scribed on the wall, relieve the tension  
Propertius' curse that the town perish  
remains in suspension.



*Sirenusae*

Where stood the Sirens?

Look for a host of bones  
on a shore.

These rocks are the *Sirenusae*?

Yes, if you like, they are  
you seem to have a geometric mind  
a line will trap a line  
and hold it there against time.

O.K. then, the Sirens were there  
on those rocks.



*The Latinist*

A long struggle he had with Latin  
now at last they lie both conquered  
tight in each other's arms  
like two lovers  
who fought whole nights  
in the lush vegetation  
of popular sex stories.







## II

YOU \* BET





*Dedication*

I can see farther than you, my friends  
but like that blind seer Tiresias  
I sometime need a dog  
to show me the obvious way.

Come then, give me that dog  
do not begrudge the expense of the leash  
we need each other.

Through me you may outlive .  
your Camelot Towers  
through me you'll grow out  
of your detective stories.





## PAUSES

*This Season*

This season is  
like a balancing of boxes  
with unexplored contents  
that may include your "death sentence"  
neatly signed by your "friends".

But look  
the moist towel of poetry  
peeps out from that corner.

Wipe  
freshen your face  
and neatly folding it  
restore the towel  
to its box.

The same towel you know  
may become your death shroud.

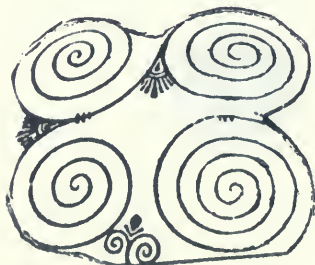


*Incident with Fish*

A trapdoor closes  
quiet quick  
as I step aside  
to let a school of fish  
stream by.

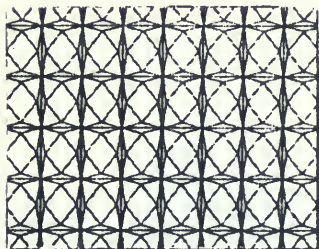
They are mute  
as all fish are  
still they go in order  
with polished scales  
and fishy mouths  
they are doing expiation.

And on a silky pillow  
I get a glimpse of their awe  
a hook  
and an inscription on the side  
Sacer.



*Still Life*

The scarf around your aged neck  
reminds me of Jocasta's noose  
and of the fan belt  
of a veteran automobile  
which can go no more.



*Why Poetry*

Why bother with poetry  
and calls to the unknown  
when the voice of thirty centuries  
has only an age of thirty?

Sip your coffee or tea  
and don't neglect the cookies.



*The Bees and Lady Murasaki*

With the bees of our desires  
closing at the bottle of life  
we tread a thin path  
between Lady Murasaki  
and surrender.

The moment is inside of us  
and outside  
among the pines  
the bees of our desires  
hover for moment  
before they reappear bottled  
and shelved in Lady Murasaki's  
living-room.



*Atitlon*

*Thou shall not*  
means that you can  
and simply take time  
until the die is cast  
and vanishes into the sand  
of revelation  
until the miracle reasserts  
the infinite validity of numbers  
to procreate and get drunk.





*Come*

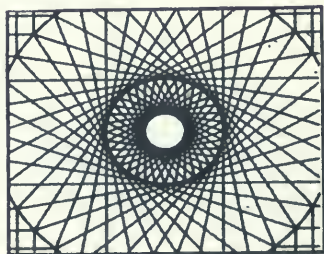
Come now  
and milk the hour  
as the farmer does with his cow  
remove the scruples  
from your heart  
as a fisherman removes  
the sea-urchin prickles  
from the sole of his foot.

Come  
tell me all about yourself  
as if it mattered.



*Rehabilitation*

Our short hiatus of innocence  
like a pool of rain  
in a factory backyard  
feet trampling on cement  
like wings of fallen angels  
veering off to retroactive benefits  
of placid nights at home  
with canned food  
and liquid visions.



*The Rocket and the Clouds*

The rocket trudges through the air  
at a speed of several hundred thousand  
miles per hour  
and those are of course the clouds.

The rocket labors through the air  
while the clouds wink at it  
for isn't it true  
that the Quixotic rocket  
will eventually come back?



## FOUR LANDSCAPES

*Strophe*

Suppose you saw the Virgin Mary on a bus  
you must admit, that would be thrilling  
people all around would make a fuss  
to have a look, the driver billing  
higher fares...but again  
the clouds from the sky would rain.



*Rock Gardens*

How familiar it all looks  
and how many times  
shall I reap the fruit  
that carries always  
the same layers  
sweet bitter sweet  
and deeper in  
the stone of no return.

A merry-go-round  
which deposits you at the beginning  
whence you came  
there you end.

Let me at least preserve  
the memory of the flowers  
the reddish laughter of the bush  
the higher culture of the lily  
the unassuming glory  
of the other plants.

Let me at least preserve  
some of our leafy talk  
that morning on the bench  
near the dry pool  
vis-a-vis the cameras of the crowd  
not meant for us.



*Picnic*

Barbecued beef on a warm spring day  
on the fringe of the lake  
with the galaxy of grasshoppers.

Brick oven bread with maple syrup  
on the dandelions by the dozing barn  
with its own strange identity.

Country dancing  
and singing displays  
while the air thickens  
into a home-made cake  
half-way the crimson tulips  
of our secret longings.



*Night Relief*

A stone pillow under a wooden sky  
the night shadows are of bronze  
you are interpreted.

The sun is missing  
that would mix the up and down  
dissolve the waxed wings  
claim the sea as its partner  
plaster all the walls  
with the same brush.

The pillow is of solid rock  
wood-panelled is the sky  
the night wraps you in its wings  
you are interpreted.



*Rite of Passage**For Ed*

I love the sunset of pines  
when life ebbs into limbo  
the bees recite customary lines  
while two hippie frogs play bingo.

Poros, 1973

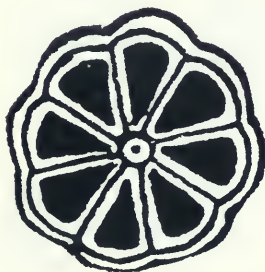




## REALITY IS ROUND

*To Rise*

To rise above events and masks  
holding the tail of a sparrow  
as it enthralls the air  
while below they lay  
the stage for another play,  
to rise on the simple accident  
of rising  
above events and masks  
to rise.



*Reincarnation*

A vanilla milkshake  
the duel of finite man  
with infinite time  
the green bush  
out of a factory's refuse  
and oh! the bright-eyed child  
of the worn-out machinist.

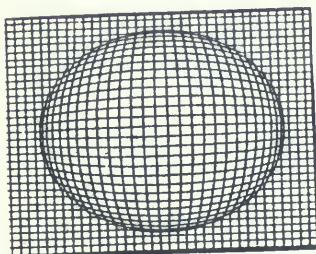


*Reality is Round*

Hostile currents  
swept me backwards  
and past the starting-point.

Oh miracle.  
I have reached my goal.

Reality is round  
like the earth.





## N O T E S

## Page

- 4        The epigraph is from Horace, *Ars Poetica*, 128.
- 7        *Opus incertum* "uncertain work", and *Opus quadratum* "square work", types of Roman wall construction.
- 8        On Dido and Aeneas Cf. Vergil, *Aeneid*, IV.
- 10       *Fiumicino* is the international airport of Rome.
- 11       The seaside district of *Santa Lucia* is a popular tourist spot in Naples, while "*Santa Lucia*" is an Italian folk song.
- 12       The poem alludes to the Roman town of *Herculaneum*, present-day *Ercolano*.
- 14       Horace's *Carmen Saeculare* was performed in 17 B.C. in celebration of a New Age.
- 15       The island of *Ischia* lies off the North end of the Bay of Naples.
- 16       The reference here is to the theory, very popular with contemporary Homerists, of the formulaic style of oral poetry.
- 17       *Literno* is a beach town a few miles North of Naples.

## Page

- I7      The Pythagoreans believed in the transmigration of souls.
- I8      *Orcus* was the Roman Hades. *Orci traditus thesauro* "transported to the store-house of Death" is a fragment from the work of Cn. Naevius, Roman dramatic and epic poet of the third c. B.C.
- I9      *Cuma* (Roman *Cumae*) was the most Northern of the Greek colonies in Italy.
- The epigraph "*Away, keep away, profane ones*" is from Vergil, *Aeneid*, VI 258.
- The Golden Bough was the hero Aeneas's "passport" to the Underworld.
- 22      *Capri* lies off the South end of the Bay of Naples. Both Roman emperors, Augustus and Tiberius, loved this island, which was named after *caper* "goat".
- The historian Suetonius Tranquillus, who lived around 100 A.D., wrote the spicy "*Lives of Caesars*".
- Axel Munthe was a wealthy Swedish doctor who had a villa on the island and told his story in "*The Chronicle of San Michele*".
- The Blue Grotto is the most famous tourist attraction on *Capri*.
- 23      Propertius was an elegiac poet of the first c. B.C., whose affair with *Cynthia Potens* "*Mighty Cynthia*" inspired much

- 24      *Baia* (Roman *Baiae*), near Naples, was a famous summer resort of ancient Rome. A pereant *Baiae* "Oh! may *Baia* perish" is from Propertius's *Elegies*, I, II, 30, in which poem Propertius bewails his mistress's eloping to *Baia* with some officer of the Roman army.
- 25      *Sirenusae* "*The Islands of the Sirens*" are some rocks off the coast of the Sorrento Peninsula.
- 31      Tiresias is the blind seer of Greek mythology, who appears in Homer and Greek tragedy as well as in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*.
- 34      *Sacer*, Roman religious term that means "holy" or "accursed", whatever the case may be.
- 35      "Jocasta's noose" alludes to the suicide of Queen Jocasta in the *Oedipus Rex* of Sophocles.
- 37      Lady Murasaki, a Japanese court writer of the IIth c. A.D., has been compared, in terms of style, to Marcel Proust. Her best-known work is "*The Tale of Genji*".
- 38      *Atitlon*, Greek for "titleless".
- 43      Rock Gardens is a public park near Hamilton, Ontario.
- 46      Poros is a small island off the Eastern coast of the Peloponnese in Greece, not too far from ancient Epidaurus.





SPECIAL NOTE  
&  
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Some of the poems included in this book appeared earlier in the booklet *The Linchpin* (Montreal, 1969) and in the literary journals: *Manna*, *Direction*, *Helios*, *Vergilius*, *Classical News and Views* and *The Coffeehouse*.

Most of the poems of the first unit, *Villa Vergiliana*, were inspired by the poet's two visits of Italy, in 1968 and 1978-1979. The unit was named after the Villa, at Cuma, where members of the Vergilian Society of America usually stay.





